

Dennis Stierer, *Niagara Gazette*

MAIN ENTRANCE: The Simonds Saw & Steel Co. on Ohio Street in Lockport was cited in a USA TODAY series as a spot where work was done on nuclear weapons.

Simonds recalled

By Cindi Wittcop and Anne Calos
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LOCKPORT — Retirees from the Simonds Saw & Steel Co. on Ohio Street say they weren't initially told they were handling radioactive materials, but the nature of the materials eventually became common knowledge.

The abandoned Simonds facility is part of a Gannett News Service study of nuclear contamination in private plants working under federal government contracts during the early years of the Cold War. From 1948 to 1956, Simonds manufactured billets for nuclear reactor fuel rods.

Ed Cook said he worked "just about everywhere" in the plant, but ended up being superintendent in the rolling department, where workers were assigned a government-contracted job. The metal they used for the job was shipped to the plant under armed guard, Cook said, and at that time (the late 1940s), workers on the floor were unaware that they were handling radioactive material.

It was only later that they found out, he said.

"The (metal) pieces were brought in by the government in a round

form that were approximately four inches in diameter and I would say about 12 to 14 inches long," Cook said. "They weighed about 200 pounds — heavier than lead."

Cook said the pieces were submerged in molten lead until they were the proper temperature, then they were taken out one at a time, rolled, cooled, then sent to Washington state. He said the average worker didn't know exactly what the pieces were used for, just that they were to fill a government work order.

Later, he said, employees learned that the government-issued billets were used in the production of atomic bombs.

Cook said he doesn't think he suffered any ill effects from working there for 45 years. He says he's in pretty good health, especially for someone who will turn 85 on Oct. 8.

"Here I am, I'm still alive," Cook said. "Some of the fellows I worked with did pass away through the years, but I couldn't say if it was from working there."

Another former Simonds employee, Charles Leavitt, 71, worked at the plant from 1948 to 1983. He says he's in "fairly good" health and feels his well-being was never threatened by

the radioactivity at the site.

Though he worked in many departments during his tenure at Simonds, Leavitt took several turns in the 16-inch roller mills.

"I was on the 16-inch mill several times," Leavitt said. "Even when you charged the furnace, you had to handle (the radioactive pieces)."

Leavitt said he remembers being sent to the hospital sporadically to be checked for something, but at that time, he didn't know what.

"After a while, we surmised that we were being checked for radiation, but they never told us that," he said.

Though he knows of several former Simonds workers who have died, he can't say if their deaths had anything or everything to do with the plant.

"I did get a phone call from a friend of mine who used to work there. He had two pacemakers installed, then he had to go to the Cleveland Clinic for a heart transplant. He thinks his problems could be related, but it's hard to say," Leavitt said.

Looking back, Leavitt admits he feels some anger at the government's apparent disregard for the welfare of Simonds workers.